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GAIN Report

Global Agricultural Information Network

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Biotechnology Introductory Workshop in Cambodia August 2016

Report Categories:

Trip Report

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Report Highlights:

This report summarizes the outcomes of the Biotech Introductory Workshop, which was organized to increase awareness of agricultural biotechnology and ensure science-based regulatory decisions in Cambodia.

Background: FAS/Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS) - Cambodia Biosafety Scoping Trip

On September 15 and 16 2015, FAS Ho Chi Minh City and PBS conducted a biosafety scoping trip to Cambodia to assess the potential of agricultural biotechnology contributing to Cambodia's long-term national agricultural production goals. Additionally, the mission was conducted to also assess the government's commitment in improving its biosafety capacity with support from the U.S. government. The team concluded that Cambodia faces serious challenges to substantially improve its agricultural production systems to meet its national production goals by 2025. The scoping team further observed that biotechnology can be a contributing factor to the development of agriculture in Cambodia. Additionally, the adoption of ag-biotech by its Asian country neighbors has influenced Cambodia's formulation and implementation of biotech policy. The scoping mission determined that there are capacity building needs at all levels of government as well as in multiple agricultural research institutions. Furthermore, an enthusiasm was expressed by senior government officials for U.S. support. After the scoping visit, continuing discussion with the Executive Secretary of the National Steering Committee for Biosafety revealed that Cambodia needs biotech technical assistance to strengthen the abilities of individuals, institutions and systems. The Executive Secretary who is also Vice Chairman of the Scientific Advisory Team on Biotechnology and Biosafety recommended that U.S. capacity building efforts should be geared towards enabling the competencies of researchers and regulators while strengthening institutions with a focus on risk assessment, risk management, liability and redress.

FAS Ho Chi Minh City and FAS Washington selected PBS including 2 experts from Vietnam and the Philippines to conduct the workshop, which was multi-dimensional in scope and objective. _

Workshop Objectives:

1. To increase stakeholders awareness of the benefits of agricultural biotechnology.
2. Increase the number of champions promoting agricultural biotechnology at the national and provincial levels.
3. To help government regulators understand and develop an efficient biosafety road map.

General Information:

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Department of State (DOS) co-organized the Introductory Workshop on Agricultural Biotechnology for Regulators, Policy Experts, Academicians, and Industry on August 30-31, 2016 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

The workshop attracted a total of 60 participants, not including speakers, FAS and U.S. Embassy staff members. The participants represented various stakeholders, including:

- Governmental agencies: Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Agricultural Fisheries and Forestry, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Economic and Finance.
- Universities and research institutes: Royal University of Agriculture, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Battambang University, Prek Leap National School of Agriculture, Cambodia Agricultural

Research and Development Institute.

- International donors: Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Cambodian Agriculture Value Chain Program (CAVAC).
- Private sector: Croplife, Du Pont Cambodia, East West Seeds Company, Syngenta, Bayer Crop Science Philippine.

Three invited speakers provided a unique learning experience and insight on key biotechnology issues and concerns to the participants, with the aim to encourage Cambodia stakeholders and decision makers to take science-based positions on biotechnology:

- Dr. Jeff Stein, Biosafety Advisor - The Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS), Donald Danforth Plant Science Center: Jeff Stein focused on the global adoption of genetically modified (GM) crops, and walked the audiences through critical issues such as GM product development, confined field trial, food safety and environment safety, nutrient composition.
- Dr. Le Huy Ham, Director General - The Institute of Agricultural Genetics in Vietnam: Dr. Le Huy Ham exposed the participants to biotech corn in Vietnam as a case study in the developing regulatory framework and commercialization of GM corn. The DG highlighted all the necessary regulations required for commercializing agricultural biotech in Vietnam.
- Dr. Jose Yorobe, Professor – The Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, University of the Philippines-Los Banos: Dr. Jose Yorobe delivered a presentation based on the measured benefits and perceived risks of Bt corn in the Philippines. He underscored that the assessment of socio-economic considerations pertaining to the adoption of biotech crops provides extremely useful information for decision makers.

Participants' questions after each presentation:

- There was a question and answer session after each presentation. In general, the majority of participants raised concerns about the impacts of GM products on human health, animal health and environment and requested clarity on why many EU countries are anti-GM. The misperception of GM crops by some workshop members may be attributed to the lack of science based knowledge at multiple levels.

We conducted a pre-training survey and post-training survey to gauge the participants' knowledge of biotechnology as well as their interests. Below are the findings of the survey:

- Pre-training survey: More than 50% of participants agreed that they understand agricultural biotech and the science behind biotech, and/or are aware of cultivation of biotech crops. However, only 50% agreed that they fully understand the benefits and perceived risks of biotech, and less than 50% have full knowledge of or can work in biosafety and food safety assessment, especially biosafety assessment of biotech crops. 80% think biotech can play an important role in agriculture in Cambodia.

- Post-training survey: Responses showed that a significant percentage of participants agreed that they understand agricultural biotech and the science behind biotech, and/or are aware of cultivation of biotech crops increased productivity. The Secretary General of the National Biosafety Steering Committee suggested that a study tour of Vietnam to see confined field trials would benefit Cambodian policy makers.

Outreach Funding:

To organize the workshop, FAS Ho Chi Minh City completed a successful proposal that received \$17,000 in funding from the State Department administered Agricultural Biotechnology Outreach program. The focus of the State Department program is providing accurate information on the benefits of agricultural biotechnology to policymakers and consumers in other countries and encouraging the adoption of science-based regulatory systems. Additionally, Post received \$10,000 in funding from OASA's New Technologies and Production Methods Division - the amount supplemented the State Department funding.